

Being Black in the Education System

by: DeRico Symonds, Program Manager, HRM Youth Advocate

NSTU professional learning staff officer Miguelle Légère had the opportunity to attend a panel discussion titled Being Black in the Education System led by DeRico Symonds. “DeRico Symonds is a leader,” she says. “He is an advocate for youth and his community. When I reached out to DeRico to write this article, I said — you have the attention of over 9,000 teachers across the province, what do you want them to know? Please read his article.”



DeRico Symonds provides the keynote address at the African Nova Scotian Communities Ancestral Roots Awards, June 9, 2018.

One of the best kept secrets is that Black people experience systemic inequality and inequities at mostly all societal levels. The irony is that society knows of this issue, those who experience it continuously discuss this issue; yet the issue does not receive the political attention it deserves.

Most of societal and structural inequities are driven by racism. For instance, the poverty rate for African Nova Scotian youth between the ages of 18 and 24 years old is 50.2 per cent and 39.6 per cent of African Nova Scotian children up to age 17 years old live in poverty. The unemployment rates among the Nova Scotia Black population sits at 16.2 per cent compared to Nova Scotia’s white population which sits at 9.8 per cent; 26.4 per cent of Black youths between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed, compared to 18.7 per cent of their white counterparts. The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission issued a report on street checks by Dr. Scot Wortley by the Halifax Regional Police Department. This report’s findings stated that Black people were six times more likely than anyone to be “street checked” by police.

and physical pain from intergenerational racism, discrimination, oppression, unfair narratives of them and their communities, high incarceration rates, high poverty rates, high unemployment rates, minimal to no educators whom resemble them in their schools and then enter the doors of an institute that does not reflect them. Yet, we expect our Black students to sit down, be quiet, and learn. Interesting, to say the least.

Of course, this is not the case for all Black people in Canadian society or in the education system. With the odds stacked against Black students, Black people are resilient, beautiful and are some of the world’s greatest inventors and thinkers. Yet, they are under-acknowledged and under reflected within the current education curriculum.

Solutions inside the school and the classroom can include but are not limited to: more cultural representation in teachers, principals, and employees within the school and merge Canadian History and Black Canadian History into one course. Be careful not to limit the celebration of Black history and people to one month of the year. Consider bringing guest speakers to discuss Black issues and sub-topics that educators are not confident in. Post images of local Black (current and historical) figures in your school and classroom. Address personal biases and privileges. Learn and understand white privilege. Educate yourself and all students on racism, discrimination, and colonization. And finally, as an educator, consider what a student may have to deal with before they make it

Why is this important in relation to the education system?

During the creation of all current political systems (education, justice, health, etc.), Black people were not considered human due to the practice of slavery and the origin of racism. If one is not considered to be human, would their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and/or history be included into the creation of the system? No.

If one can understand the challenges that may seem insurmountable for Black students, it then helps one to understand the phenomena of “Being Black in the Education System”. It is likely that Black students face challenges previously mentioned because they enter into a political system that deliberately does not reflect them.

For instance, Black students in the education system often feel they are not reflected in the history being taught. The options, in most cases, are: Canadian History or African Canadian History. This othering of Black history, as if it is not a part of the mainstream chronicle, can denote an unimportance of Black history to Black learners. Additionally, the history being taught of Black people fails to reflect historical events pre-dating slavery and post the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

As we know, February is Black History/ African Heritage Month. Concerted effort is placed on recognizing the contributions of Black Canadians during this period. Why are the contributions of many Black Canadians celebrated only one month of the year within the school system?

Finally, Black students shoulder both mental

to your classroom.

To connect with DeRico Symonds visit www.dericosymonds.ca or Twitter & Instagram @dericosymonds

Devet, R. (2017, December 1). Census 2016: African Nova Scotian poverty rates through the roof, unemployment numbers terrible. Retrieved October 10, 2019, from <https://nsadvocate.org/2017/11/30/census-2016-african-nova-scotian-poverty-rates-through-the-roof-unemployment-numbers-terrible/>.

DeRico Symonds has been working with youth and communities for 12+ years, currently working for Halifax Regional Municipality as the Program Manager with the HRM Youth Advocate. DeRico is well versed in youth & community work as well as experience with youth residential work, emergency shelter and long-term supportive housing for youth.